

## “The Bengaluru Declaration”: Notes from a South-South conversation that refuses to wait

I didn't mean to coin a declaration. I only wanted a friend's help.

*Dr. Sammy Wambua*

A few months ago, I was scheduled to give a plenary and a separate talk at a pan-African conference - two appearances on consecutive days that landed right on top of the annual wildlife genomics workshop I run. In a panic, I texted my Indian collaborator and asked whether he could take one of the sessions off my plate. He read the programme carefully and then responded unexpectedly, “*You should do both, even if it is a lot of work... It is important for people to see Africans doing research in Africa using cutting-edge technologies; otherwise, parachute science will never stop.*”

Only later did I realize why that sentence landed like a small earthquake. The panels I was on - at a proudly pan-African meeting, hosted in Africa, wrapped in the language of pan-Africanism—had almost no other African scientists on them. Neither I nor the organisers had flagged it as odd. That normalisation - the quiet, almost automatic acceptance that authority would be flown in from elsewhere - was the shock. It points to not only how the Global South has been trained to look outward for validation, but also how the system is arranged so we seldom become the authorities of our own landscapes.

Once you see it, you cannot unsee it. In biodiversity conservation gatherings across Africa, the “expert on African wildlife” is often a person whose home country has never hosted an elephant or a giraffe. We

can argue that science is universal—and it is—but location matters when conservation decisions must be made within the grain of local ecologies, laws, languages, and livelihoods. The pattern persists because the Global South plays with less funding, pays more for the same reagents, waits longer in bureaucratic queues, and gets told by top journals that the methods we are finally able to deploy - say, metabarcoding - are no longer novel enough for them. Meanwhile, samples and stories continue to migrate northward on the back of collaborations that are sometimes honest and generative, but too often transactional. Parachute science is not a myth; it is a workflow.

This is not an argument against the Global North, nor a claim that misbehaviour belongs to one geography. It is an argument for meeting power with symmetry. We will not know how equitable science feels until we do more science with each other - South to South - at a scale that is visible, durable, and normal.

### **A moment in India**

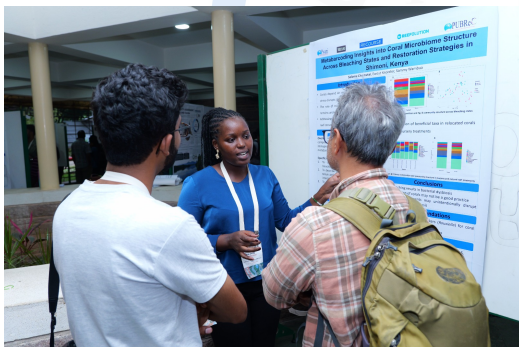
I had these thoughts in my head when I travelled to Bengaluru, India for the Student Conference on Conservation Science. My plenary talk was, partly, about equitable science, with a simple proposition: the Global South must be present in the creation and the use of science that shapes its futures. This part of the presentation

was the one that appeared to have lifted the room. Colleagues came up to say that the Indian experience resonated deeply with African realities: the funding asymmetries, the paperwork bottlenecks, the prestige gradients that dictate whose names go where.



*Dr. Sammy Wambua delivering his talk at The Student Conference on Conservation Science 2025 held at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, India.*

Yet, only three Africans were in that conference — my two students and me. The absence felt like a data point in itself.



*Salome Chemutai, a researcher in Dr. Sammy Wambua's Wildlife Genomics lab, presenting some of her work to participants during the Student Conference on Conservation Science 2025 held at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, India*



*Rodney Omukuti, another researcher in Dr. Sammy Wambua's lab who made a presentation during the Student Conference on Conservation Science 2025.*

During the Q&A a respected professor asked about my collaborations with the

North. On another day, I might have answered politely and moved on. But the night before, a call from Kenya had warned me that a European scientist - someone I had collaborated with - was in a Kenyan park trying to collect samples while citing collaboration with me. He had not told me he would be coming to Kenya, and clearly, had he not been caught, he was just going to sample and fly away. He had no permits. He did, however, have a ticket out for the samples.

That phone call turned the professor's question into a mirror. Yes, many North-South collaborations are fair. Yes, some South-South partnerships also fail the ethics test. But we won't have the evidence to compare until **South-South cooperation is not the exception we celebrate but the infrastructure we inhabit.**

I left the stage thinking about that friend's advice again, and I wrote a small line on social media which - half in jest, half in hope - I called "The Bengaluru Declaration." It was not a document, not yet. It was a feeling that the room shared: a quiet, mutual resolve to deepen Africa-India work and, by doing so, help redraw the norms of conservation science.

### How we got here? And how we walk out together

How did we arrive at conferences in Africa with so few African experts and so many foreign authorities on African subjects? It isn't a single villain. It's an ecosystem of incentives.

1. **Funding asymmetry** means African and other Southern labs often operate on project-to-project oxygen, with limited discretionary funds to explore, risk, or reboot.
2. **Cost differentials** make the same reagent dearer for us, and long procurement chains add weeks to a clock that already moves too slowly.
3. **Prestige gatekeeping** tells us that if

a method is newly feasible in Nairobi or Kigali but already “standard” in Boston, then our work is “not novel,” even when local application is precisely the novelty that moves conservation practice.

4. **Collaboration design** too often positions Southern partners as field-work fixers rather than co-designers of questions, budgets, authorship, and benefits.

South-South partnerships won't solve every asymmetry, but they can change our footing so we build power together. The proposal is simple: make collaboration ordinary, visible, and durable by learning and doing side-by-side; co-mentoring talent across borders; pooling purchasing and services to cut costs and grow local capacity; setting clear ethics and data/material governance that prevent surprises and ensure fair credit; creating fast micro-grants to turn ideas into field-tested practice; forming a reviewers' circle that values applied, context-rich work; and running policy-practice studios where communities and ministries co-author actionable next steps. The through-line is equity by design—shared authorship, transparent costs, open artefacts, and timelines measured in weeks, not years—so the Global South moves from *ad-hoc* pilot projects to a self-sustaining, peer-to-peer operating system.

These are not moonshots. They are shapes that already exist in fragments. My own corridor between Kenya and India has taught me that the ingredients are here: the labs, the mentors, the students hungry to build, the officials who - when invited early - can move a permit from “stalled” to “signed.” The missing piece is coordination with intent, scaled with resources and protected by norms we write ourselves.

And that returns me to where I began: the friend who told me to take both talks so people could see an African scientist doing high-end genomics in Africa.

Visibility is not vanity; it is infrastructure. When a student in Kilifi or Kolkata watches someone who looks like them show a new coral-genomics pipeline that actually runs on their own machines, a door opens that no reviewer can quietly close. When conference programmes in Africa fill their panels with African scientists as the default, we do not exclude the world; we invite it into a room whose centre of gravity is honest.

I also want to say, without defensiveness, that North-South collaborations remain valuable. Many of my best co-authored papers, and my students' most transformative experiences, were made with generous colleagues in the North. But the principle is simple: we collaborate from strength, not from dependency. South-South partnerships help grow that strength. They also create a baseline of trust and speed—so that when a Northern partner joins, it is into a project already shaped by local realities.

So here is my small, heart-level proposal to **The Global South Convergence Forum** and to everyone who read that tweet about a Bengaluru Declaration and smiled: let's make it less of a quip and more of a timetable. Move quickly on visible, doable wins that build muscle memory for South-South work; pair learning with doing; turn ideas into trials and trials into shared practices; hard-wire ethics, credit, and transparency from the start; and keep ourselves honest with a public ledger of who gets the mic and who shares the work. The spirit is momentum over fanfare, equity by design, and steady compounding: each small collaboration seeding the next, until cooperation across the Global South is not an event but a habit.

I believe this is what the Bengaluru Declaration meant to capture: not a manifesto but a meeting of minds that acts. A promise that African and Asian and Latin American scientists will not merely ask for space but build it—beautifully, jointly, and with sleeves rolled up. A recognition that soli-

clarity is not a sentiment; it is a schedule. our own weather, the rain falls where it is  
And a stubborn faith that when we make needed most.

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